

# THE BLUE BANNER UPON AMERICAN SOIL

By HUGH M. MILLER

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*Photo from Presbyterian Historical Society*  
Makemie Monument in Accomack County, Virginia

In the late summer of 1982, as he had in the early summer 275 years before, Francis Makemie made news in New York City.

This time it was the unveiling of a bronze plaque to his memory at Bowling Green in lower Manhattan, not by Presbyterians, but by attorney Paul O'Dwyer and the Irish Institute of New York.

I was reminded of listening to broadcast news one morning in November 1974 when O'Dwyer was speaking upon his induction as president of the City Council of New York City. He recalled that the tradition of freedom among the masses of that great city, representing every nation, race and religion, dated from Francis Makemie. I had wondered how many present that morning or listening or watching on radio or television knew what O'Dwyer was talking about.

When the Republic of Ireland in April 1982 issued stamps commemorating a pair of preachers by the name of Francis, marking the 800th anniversary of the birth of Francis of Assisi and the 300th anniversary of the ordination of Francis Makemie, there were stirrings of interest not only among philatelists, but among Christians on both sides of the Atlantic.

Francis of Assisi all recognized, but this other Francis — who was he? Paddy Harte, Minister of State of the Republic of Ireland, announcing the stamps, candidly identified Makemie as "the Father of American Presbyterianism ... who strove successfully for religious liberty in America nearly 300 years ago...."

Then, when my friend Professor Norman V. Hope outlined Makemie's all-too-brief life (*Outlook*, Nov. 8, 1982), I wondered again why all the excitement about a strolling Colonial preacher, whose name is hardly an American watchword and seldom heard in Presbyterian circles.

I remembered being taken to a tiny park on Holden's Creek in Accomack County, Va., just below the Maryland-Virginia line and west of the town of Temperanceville on U.S. 13, one summer day by a young woman, later to become my wife. There stands the imposing Makemie Monument, erected by the Presbyterian Historical Society and lovingly cared for by neighboring Presbyterians.

In *Makemieland Memorials*, L.P. Bowen described this Presbyterian shrine on the Eastern Shore, marking the burial place of Makemie, as "the granite monument surmounted by the imposing statue; eyes raised reverently to the heavens, the Holy Bible in one hand, the other lifted in benediction. That benediction is now perpetuated for the centuries."

Yet, when talk began of a tercentenary celebration to mark Makemie's coming to America there were those, even in the presbytery with six congregations which call him "father," who openly wondered why. Surely, the title of William Thomson Hanzsche's book, *Forgotten Founding Fathers*, was prophetic. Makemie was the first of those of whom he wrote in 1954.

A few years earlier, I. Marshall Page, in *The Life Story of Rev. Francis Makemie*, claimed "No greater man ever adorned the pages of American history." Who, then, was this Presbyterian preacher, subject of such extravagant praise, whom now the General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. have voted to honor in 1983?

## EARLY LIFE

Makemie was born in 1658 in County Donegal, Ireland, of parents who had fled to Ireland to escape the bloody persecutions of the Puritans in Scotland. In the early 17th century the English government insisted on the regimentation of worship as proof of loyalty of its citizens. With the growth of Puritanism, the effort to purify life with Christian living, the conflict became civil war.

Archbishop William Laud, who had become virtually first minister of the crown, eagerly accepted the task of rooting out Calvinism in England and Presbyterianism in Scotland. His goal was to return the Established English Church as a branch of the Church Catholic.

Laud ordered the communion table removed from the middle of the people, pushed Roman Catholic fashion against the wall in the chancel, and guarded from the profane people by a rail. He required all to bow to the altar. Sunday worship was compelled. Such orders had behind them the power of the government. When the Puritans resisted, Charles called out the army and precipitated the strife.

Following the Cromwell interval, the divine right of kings grew with new zeal. Two thousand Presbyterian ministers were driven from English pulpits and bloody persecutions broke out in Scotland. Makemie's parents were among those who fled to Ireland, where Francis was born.

Young Makemie returned to Scotland for his education in the University of Glasgow, dedicating his life to the sacred task of promoting the faith which was struggling for its very existence.

At the age of 22 he was ordained by the Irish Presbytery of Laggan under circumstances clouded by the persecution now extending to Ireland. There are no entries in the minutes of the Presbytery of Laggan from July 31, 1681 until Dec. \_\_, 1690, a period during which some of the leading men of the presbytery were imprisoned, among them William Trail, its clerk. Trail is known to have come to America about the same time as Makemie, perhaps with him, though he remained only a few years.

Page, quoting "some writer," conjectures that Makemie may have been ordained behind closed doors, or in the glens, or in the deep woods, or hidden in the bogs. That it took place Makemie attests in his "Answer to George Keith's Libel Against a Catechism Published by Francis Makemie," which is given in full in *The Life and Writings of Francis Makemie* by Boyd S. Schlenker.

It was during this tumultuous time that the Presbytery of Laggan received a request for "a Godly minister" from Col. William Stevens, a wealthy landowner whose holdings included a plantation in Maryland, which he called Rehoboth (Genesis 26:22). Although Stevens is identified at the time of the request as a member of the Church of England, he is listed in John Handy's *History of Rehoboth Presbyterian Church* as first of the leaders of that congregation. Presbytery commissioned Makemie for this call and he arrived in Maryland early in 1683. En route, he stopped, following common custom, in the Barbados.

## ARRIVAL IN AMERICA

At this time Maryland was a proprietary government under the Calverts. Although Roman Catholics, they permitted a wide degree of religious freedom and 75 percent of the colonists in Maryland were Protestants.

Here, Makemie was easily accepted. "He personified the finest traditions of the Scottish Kirk; his charming personality and social graces made him acceptable everywhere; but he never let success or comfort turn him aside from his supreme mission — the establishment of the legal right of men to worship God as their consciences dictated," Hanzsche wrote.

Entering a commercial partnership with William Anderson, a wealthy merchant and landowner on Holden's Creek, Makemie became a master sailor. With Anderson's blessing he combined commerce and the ministry of Christ on trips to Barbados and south along the Atlantic East. In the Barbados he was instrumental in reorganizing the Reformed churches and there received a royal license to preach. "The Apostle of the Chesapeake knew how to harmonize religion and dollars," Bowen wrote.

Returning from his first trip from the Chesapeake to the Barbados, Makemie acquired lands on Matchatank Creek in Accomack County, Virginia. It probably was soon after that he married Naomi, William Anderson's daughter. Anderson accepted Francis as a son. This marriage, which resulted in Makemie's sharing Anderson's wealth in land and trade, is significant in that it allowed him to follow his ministry in preaching, writing and encouraging congregations in a wide area without need of financial return. At no time did Makemie receive a salary for his ministry.

At least eight congregations, active today, look to Makemie for their Presbyterian beginnings.

First is Rehoboth, called the oldest continuous Presbyterian Church in America and the oldest church building in Maryland. Also in Maryland are Buckingham in Berlin, Pitts Creek in Pocomoke City, Manokin in Princess Anne, Makemie Memorial in Snow Hill and Wicomico in Salisbury — all congregations of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. In Virginia, congregations of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. are Francis Makemie in Accomac and Naomi Makemie in Onancock, named for his wife and in the community where they began their married life. His ministry is associated also with congregations in the Norfolk area of Virginia and the Carolinas. Truly, as one historian wrote, Makemie planted "the blue banner upon American soil."

The passing of three centuries calls Presbyterians and all Americans to give heed to the blessings for which we are in Makemie's debt.

## THE BALANCED PURITAN

First, his was the true balanced Puritanism.

Even among American Protestants, Puritanism had a rather poor image, inherited from its English Church detractors. In the colonies, the Puritan was the liberal of his day who saw in goodness of life infinite joy and in evil infinite woe. His overwhelming passion was for freedom. No nation in Europe had a humane a criminal code as the colonies of the Puritan New World.

Hanzsche has noted that although 20 witches were put to death in Salem, this was the only colony in America where this emotional outrage occurred; but, in Suffolk, England, he continues, 200 witches were executed from 1645-1647 and probably as many as 30,000 were executed for witchcraft in England during that century.

Never were the "Blue Laws" in the Puritan colonies as stern as in England, where as late as 1776 in London the English were compelled to attend church on Sunday or go to prison.

Basically, the Puritan wanted to be left alone to work out his religion and life: the love of family, land, hospitality, honest and hard work, and worship of God. He was against all religion by law and would, without doubt, have taken a dim view of prayers directed by government.

Makemie was a typical Puritan of the middle colonies. He had business acumen, yet he never lost his primary values among secondary things. Despite the comforts of his environment, to him the chief concern was spiritual — the promotion of the Kingdom of God in all life.

To explain the Protestant Puritan ethic in language all could understand he wrote and published a catechism which was widely circulated. It received praise even among the Presbyterians of London. The New England divines called it "the work of a reverend and judicious minister" and urged its use in their Puritan families.

## FOUNDATIONS FOR THE REPUBLIC

Makemie left a second blessing as he laid the foundations of a republic on these shores and this, 75 years before the Declaration of Independence.

Life and laws in the colonies were copied largely from England. In no instance was this more the case than in religion, the colonies becoming extensions of the crown. It was to avoid governmental controls in religion that many had fled. Still, as property of the crown was granted to those loyal to that for which the crown stood, the colonists were finding little changed from the Old World.

It was Makemie who sowed the seeds of unity among the colonies long before the struggle for such would erupt into war.

Makemie was known and accepted outside of Maryland and Virginia, preaching as far south as the Carolinas and north to Boston. In August 1692 he preached in the old Barbados Store in Philadelphia, the first regular Presbyterian service and the first Presbyterian sermon in that city.

Early in his time in America he was encouraging others to follow from Ireland and England. As late as 1704 he brought ministers from England, financing both his trip and their coming.

However, these men he brought in 1704 and settled in Maryland soon found themselves in legal difficulties. The Calverts had lost their proprietary rights and Maryland became a crown colony. Freedom of worship ceased. All were compelled to pay taxes to support the English Church. Non-conformist preachers were required to receive licenses from the courts. Severe restrictions on times and places of worship were set by law, even though Presbyterians outnumbered Anglicans 20-to-1.

Facing this domination of religion by the government, Makemie presented (---) for these preachers, finally persuading the royal governor to grant them licenses. They took pastorates in the so-called Makemie churches.

About this same time Makemie made plans to replace the old Rehoboth Church. In this, too, he found severe restrictions, causing him to erect the building on his own lands, although he had to go to court to do so. The beautiful edifice, still in use, was built of brick, brought from England by Makemie and others as ballast in their ships. In his will he bequeathed this to the Presbyterians forever.

## THE FIRST PRESBYTERY

These and other experiences convinced Makemie that some type of intercolonial organization for the common protection of religious freedom was required.

Therefore, he called together Presbyterian ministers from Virginia, Maryland, Delaware and Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Although the minutes of this first meeting are lost, the date was December 1705 or more probably early in 1706. It has been described as the first official gathering of any kind to cross colony lines in America and so of critical significance in the eventual development of the colonies into one nation.

The second meeting, of which there is record in minutes, was in Freehold, N.J., on Dec. 27, 1706. Makemie was the moderator. Its purpose was to examine and ordain John Boyd, one of the men Makemie brought to America who also had studied at Glasgow University. Voting to sustain his parts of trial, Presbytery ordained Boyd and settled him in Freehold. The New Jersey churches lost no time in becoming part of this intercolonial body.

Hanzsche notes that by this act of organizing the presbytery, sometimes called "The General Presbytery" or "The Presbytery of Philadelphia," and by the ordination of Boyd, "Francis Makemie developed a new American Presbyterianism, cut loose from any concept of the ministry as a hierarchy, a closed corporation,

a self-perpetuating body of a fictitious apostolic succession, and followed the New Testament model. At the same time the first American Presbytery had present no delegate from the home church across the sea and no official representative of government . . . independent of the Old World control and independent of government!"

## BATTLE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Yet, the battle for religious freedom had not been won. Winning this battle is the third debt not only Presbyterians but all Americans owe Makemie.

Among the middle colonies, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Delaware, and originally Maryland, as we have noted, had religious liberty secured by their proprietors. But in 1702 New Jersey was made a royal colony and placed under the rule of the hated Lord Cornbury, governor of New York.

Cornbury was the spendthrift scion of a noble house, a cousin of Queen Anne. Under his authority, the union of throne and altar was to be as total and terrifying as that in England. The Anglican Church was used to buttress civil authorities against all enemies desiring freedom of worship in the New World. Cornbury determined that only orthodox Anglicanism be permitted in his realm and was absolutely intolerant toward all dissenters.

Hearing of specific events in New York, including Cornbury's taking over the church building of the Presbyterians at Jamaica, removing the minister and appropriating the manse for his own personal dwelling, Makemie went deliberately to New York, taking John Hampton with him. Paul Carlson, in *Our Presbyterian Heritage*, calls this "the first 'moderatorial tour' by Presbyterian leaders in America." It was shortly after, or perhaps directly from the meeting of Presbytery in Freehold. These persecutions were affecting his people: Dutch, French Huguenot, and Scottish families in New York. They were his people.

Makemie had one of the Presbyterian men of the city report to Cornbury that he and his comrade Hampton would like to meet him. Cornbury invited them to dinner, during which time they revealed their identity. No request was made for permission to preach, for both held licenses from royal colonies, Makemie from Barbados and probably one from Virginia, and Hampton from Maryland.

After a few days, Makemie was invited to preach in the Dutch Reformed Church. Cornbury refused to let the church open the doors. Accepting the offer of William Jackson, a member of the congregation, to preach in his home, Makemie did so, requesting that the doors be left open so it might be considered a public service.

The next Sunday, his companion Hampton preached at Newton, Long Island, and announced that Makemie would preach there the following Wednesday.

On Tuesday, Hampton and Makemie were arrested on a warrant signed Jan. 21, 1707, by Cornbury as "Presbyterian preachers who have taken upon themselves to preach in a private house without having obtained my license for so doing . . . with intent there to spread their pernicious doctrine and principles. . . ."

After a day and night in jail they were brought before Cornbury, producing their licenses to preach which they claimed good in all of the American colonies of the crown. Insisting that these did not apply to his colonies, Cornbury offered to let them go if they would promise never to preach in his government again and give bond for their good behavior.

Makemie replied that he was willing to give bond for their good behavior, but he could not and would not agree not to preach. Enraged, Cornbury returned them to prison. There, they spent eight weeks in primitive conditions that adversely affected Makemie's health.

Under pressure from citizens far and near challenging the legality of prison without trial, the court finally, in March, ordered a writ of *habeas corpus* and they were set free.

Hampton was dropped from the case, but Makemie was ordered to return in June for trial.

When June came, Makemie, well-read in the law, experienced by birth and life in freedom's cost, and assisted by several courageous lawyers, defended himself and freedom brilliantly. The jury declared him absolutely innocent of any offense.

Innocent though he was, Cornbury forced him to pay the cost of his trial, their board, such as it was, while they were prisoners, and even the salary of the men who prosecuted him — in all a sizable sum.

Fame of the case and freedom's triumph spread throughout the colonies and to England. The next New York legislature passed laws making impossible a repetition of such prohibition. Freedom of worship was given its legal base in New York and New Jersey — royal colonies. Indeed, the legal beginnings of freedom of worship were established for all royal colonies. In a matter of months Cornbury was recalled to England in disgrace.

Makemie returned, ill and worn, to his Eastern Shore plantation and his beloved Rehoboth Church, to be pastor of a vigorous congregation of free men and women. Because of this man, described by Cornbury as "a strolling preacher of the colonies," men and women worship freely there and throughout the land today.

Busy in urging more ministers to come from the Old Country and in affairs of the expanding presbytery, Makemie died in the summer of 1708 in his 50th year, 15 months after his greatest victory which Americans celebrate every Lord's Day.